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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0123
INFO ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 003291

NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/POUNDS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/07/2015
TAGS: IS LE KPAL PGOV PREL PTER SY
SUBJECT: MGLE01: JUMBLATT'S STRAIGHT TALK

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per section 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a meeting with the Ambassador on the afternoon of October 6, Druse leader Walid Jumblatt flatly stated his belief that the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, and the series of bombings committed since then, were the work of the Syrian regime, specifically Bashar Assad. His colleague, Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh, who was also at the luncheon, stated the Syrians "are on the counter-attack, similar to what they did last November and December." Hamadeh maintained the Syrian campaign began with the July 12 assassination attempt on Minister of Defense Elias Murr, and has been increasing in tempo. Jumblatt said the international community should send Bashar another message, warning the Syrian president not to destabilize Lebanon. Regarding the recent public dispute over the intentions of Palestinian militias in Lebanon, Jumblatt suggested now was not the time to raise an internal conflict over militias and arms that have been there a long time because it would shift the focus from Mehlis -- and away from Syria. Jumblatt also criticized the extended absence of Saad Hariri, who he believes is now heavily influenced by the advice of President Chirac. Concerning a possible visit to Washington, Jumblatt adopted a relatively disinterested pose, despite his earlier requests for Embassy assistance. His plans are now open-ended and, having missed his original Georgetown lecture date, he may not travel until after Ramadan. End summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador hosted a lunch for Druse leader Walid Jumblatt on Thursday afternoon, October 6. (Jumblatt was on the Embassy compound to also obtain a visitor's visa, whose issuance required a waiver from the Department due to intemperate comments made by the Druse leader in 2003.) Also attending the luncheon were Ministry of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh (an assassination target in October 2004) and former member of parliament (and aspiring presidential candidate) Dr. Ghattas Khoury, as well as Poloff and Pol Specialist. Jumblatt appeared tired and was quiet at the outset of the meeting, but became more animated as the discussions progressed, particularly when he recalled anecdotes from the civil war. He fondly remembered the time his forces inadvertently shelled the residences of both the U.S. and Spanish ambassadors, even though what they were really trying to hit was the Baabda palace -- which according to the old warlord, "is really quite difficult to do."

SYRIA'S CENTRAL ROLE

¶3. (C) The primary topic of conversation was the role of the Syrian regime in Lebanon's instability. Jumblatt clearly stated that Bashar Assad and his regime were responsible for the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, as well as the recent series of events which were increasing tensions -- the recent more aggressive posture taken by Palestinian militias in the Biqa and their enclave located south of Beirut, strong attacks against the government in Parliament by Hizballah representatives, as well as the long string of unsolved bombings in and around Beirut. Marwan Hamadeh categorized these developments as a "counter-attack" orchestrated by the

Syrian regime under the direct supervision of Bashar Assad to ensure its survival and escape from the intense international pressure. Hamadeh maintained this most recent Syrian effort dates back to the July 12 attempted assassination of Minister of Defense Elias Murr, and it has increased in tempo and aggressiveness.

¶4. (C) Jumblatt suggested to the Ambassador the time was right to send a message to Syria -- to warn it to cease its campaign of violence and destabilization in Lebanon. When asked what form this warning should take, Jumblatt smiled and suggested "perhaps a message from Iraq." Hamadeh took a more serious tone, but he concurred with the Druse leader and insisted Syria was now calling in all its resources and would escalate the situation as we come closer to the release of the Mehlis report. All three guests inquired about the report, and while the Ambassador said he did not know its contents, he urged his guests to continue to support the work of the Mehlis investigation and to ask their political colleagues to do likewise. He stressed that the difficult part would come with the release of the report, when its findings had to be effectively implemented by Lebanon's judicial system. Jumblatt and Hamadeh both felt that UN investigative and judicial assistance was critical in the post-report phase and hoped the UN effort would continue.

¶5. (C) Addressing the political climate, Jumblatt acknowledged that tensions had increased, especially concerning the recent attention given to arms held by Palestinian militias. Jumblatt argued that pressure at this time was counter-productive because it took the focus off the real culprit and source of instability -- the Syrian regime. He reasoned that those Palestinian groups, and their arms, had always been a part of the Lebanese political landscape. He agreed that the issue needed to be addressed, but he argued not at this time. It simply took pressure off Syria and increased Sunni-Shia tensions. The Ambassador noted that it was not the Lebanese Armed Forces that had raised the tensions recently, but rather Ahmad Jibril's PFLP-GC had changed the status quo.

¶6. The conversation turned to political personalities and how they were performing in office. Khoury, Hamadeh, and even a grudging Jumblatt, agreed that PM Siniora was punching well above his weight class. His unyielding defense of the government and his non-sectarian tenor in yesterday's debate in parliament impressed even previous detractors. Hamadeh and Jumblatt both believe he is not being well served by a hit-and-miss collection of cabinet members, but overall his performance both in New York and, more importantly, at home has been unexpectedly sound and reassuring. (Comment: Jumblatt has been known to grumble about Siniora. We attribute his positive attitude today to the fact that Siniora called Jumblatt and met with him yesterday, the first face-to-face meeting since mid-July. Jumblatt's notorious paranoia, we have discovered, worsens when he feels he is being ignored. End comment.)

¶7. (C) The same could not be said for Sa'ad Hariri, whose frequent and lengthy absences are clearly getting on the nerves of other political leaders. Jumblatt sarcastically asked, "where is our majority leader?" Hamadeh suggested that Hariri receives far too much of his advice from President Chirac, who himself is far too conservative because he feels partly responsible for assuring Rafiq Hariri shortly before his assassination "not to be concerned because he (Chirac) had delivered a message." Even Dr. Khoury, who owes much to the Hariri bloc, suggested that the least Sa'ad should do during the holy month of Ramadan is to show up in Lebanon for a few days and host Iftar dinners for his anxious followers. Regarding the almost invisible Samir Ja'ja, leader of the Lebanese Forces, Jumblatt curtly and dismissively stated, "he is the least of my concerns."

WASHINGTON VISITS

¶8. (C) Jumblatt was noncommittal on rescheduling his Washington trip, saying that his Georgetown University

sponsors had suggested waiting until after Ramadan. (Note: Jumblatt's Georgetown lecture was originally scheduled for October 4, but Jumblatt himself asked that it be postponed to ensure sufficient time for U.S. visa adjudication. End note.)

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Walid Jumblatt displayed his usual sang froid and, when interested, had a comment on nearly every issue. His unequivocal belief that Bashar Assad and his regime are directly responsible for the full range of activities that have destabilized Lebanon was of note, as was Marwan Hamadeh belief that the Syrian regime will likely attempt increasingly risky behavior to escape the corner it now finds itself. End comment.

FELTMAN